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Riley Announces Largest-Ever Seizure Of Heroin In Alabama Warns That Fiscal Crisis Could Make Future Finds A Rarity

Montgomery - Gov. Bob Riley announced Friday that Alabama state troopers have seized 24 pounds of brown heroin with an estimated street value of \$4.3 million. The seizure represents the largest-ever heroin discovery in Alabama and the third largest heroin seizure in the nation this year.

The governor also warned that the state's current fiscal crisis could force a dramatic reduction in the state trooper ranks and allow drug traffickers to operate more freely on Alabama's roadways.

"I commend Alabama's state troopers, who work every day to make our state safer," said Riley. "Their work is a clear signal to all that Alabama is committed to halting the flow of illegal drugs into and through our state. Drug traffickers pose a real threat to a lawful, peaceful society, and they will not be tolerated.

"At the same time, unless our government reform and accountability package is approved by the voters in September, that state's current fiscal crisis could force us to slash the number of troopers patrolling Alabama's roadways and make drug busts such as this even more difficult to carry out," Riley added.

Riley warned that possible 18 percent cuts in the Department of Public Safety budget would force at least 97 state troopers to be laid off from the agency that is already 25 percent understaffed. The fiscal crisis would also force an end to trooper assistance to stranded motorists and the closure of two highway patrol posts and four field offices across the state.

In discussing the drug seizure, Riley said the heroin was found hidden inside a Chevrolet Malibu after a state trooper stopped the vehicle for a traffic violation late Tuesday night on Interstate 85 northbound in Lee County. Assisting in the search were a trooper canine and Opelika police officers. The vehicle was registered in Texas and, according to the driver, en route to New York City.

The driver, Lucia Chavez-Flores, 31, and her passenger, Maria Elena Andrade, 33, were arrested and face federal charges of heroin possession with intent to distribute. If convicted, each would face a minimum of 10 years in prison and a maximum of life. Both Chavez-Flores and Andrade are residents of Laredo, Texas.

Riley said he will ask the Lee County district attorney to determine if it is appropriate to charge the two under Alabama's drug "kingpin" law. Section 13A-12-231 (3)d of the Alabama Code carries a minimum sentence of life without parole for "trafficking in illegal drugs." The code defines a trafficker as "any person who knowingly sells, manufactures, delivers, or brings into this state, or who is knowingly in actual or constructive possession of, four grams or more of any morphine,

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opium, or any salt, isomer, or salt of an isomer thereof, including heroin." Twenty-four pounds of heroin is equal to 10,905.6 grams, or 10.9 kilos.

Department of Public Safety Director Col. Mike Coppage said the seizure "affirms the professionalism and training of our state troopers. This was an alert trooper who showed exceptional skill and training by looking beyond the traffic stop for criminal activity."

Coppage said the investigation, involving troopers assigned to Public Safety's Highway Patrol and Alabama Bureau of Investigation divisions, is continuing.

Only two other U.S. heroin seizures this year eclipse the quantity seized by Alabama's troopers. Earlier this year 13 kilos were seized in Florida, and 12.7 kilos were seized in Texas.